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On Clinging to Whiteness and Failing Humanity (And Myself)

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Abstract

A short reflection on my time in Americorps, when I chose loyalty to Whiteness over loyalty to humanity.

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In this paper, I will recount a personal story of “loving my whiteness” (Matias & Allen, 2013): that is, adhering to the beliefs and behaviors that produce racial oppression and uphold White supremacy. I hope to convey that when this story took place, I was much less developed in my understanding of racism, Whiteness, and what it means to be an ally.

When I graduated from the University of Missouri-Columbia, I had no idea what I wanted to do. I had developed somewhat of a critical consciousness through my social science and journalism classes. After volunteering at a domestic violence shelter and becoming a diversity trainer during my senior year, I wanted to continue learning about and working toward social equality. So, I did what many “lost” graduating seniors did, I joined a national service program, Americorps.

At first, I was nervous but excited. I was placed in a social services hub on the north side of St. Louis, an area I had passed by many times during visits. Driving through St. Louis on my way home to Chicago, I would look down from the freeway onto the dilapidated buildings, seemingly deserted streets, and graffiti-covered walls. I felt angry, but hopeful. Why did this area of the city look so different from the south and west sides? I knew that racism and decades of segregation had largely caused the destruction of the city around unmistakable color lines. But why was nothing improving? Why did nobody seem to care?

About a month into my service, the truth slowly started to sink in as I felt the Whiteness infused in the city’s politics, economy, and institutions also burgeon within my chest. For instance, I was always proud of being antimaterialistic, not placing much value on the price of my clothes or the

kind of car I drove. I distrusted the clear economic privilege afforded to many White people and the urge to flaunt that privilege. Yet, when I went to work for an organization which served predominantly African Americans, I clung to those aspects of Whiteness. I felt an acute desire to separate, to look down upon our clients the way I looked down upon north St. Louis from the freeway. I walked through the halls of the Settlement House standing tall with an authority that I had not earned. Wearing expensive, cheetah-print loafers and carrying a new designer bag, I thought, “I’m here, but I’m not like *them*. I’m not like *them*. I’m not like *them*.”

Further, I was working in a city that had consistently been ranked as the “most violent” city in the United States, yet I didn’t fear the violence I saw on the news. Instead, I felt discomfort working for a predominantly African American staff. The woman who shared my desk was from the neighborhood and undoubtedly knew more about its needs than I ever could. The African American social worker down the hall was working toward her doctorate and put my knowledge of social issues to shame. Finally, my stomach churned, my heart beat fast, and my hands began to sweat while attending a one-on-one meeting with the African American community organizer whose instructions I was expected to follow. I wanted desperately to run back to my White neighborhood where I could feel superior again—where I could look out my window and wonder about *those* people over *there*.

My fear of being socially subordinate to people of Color demonstrated my deep loyalty to White supremacy, a system that guarantees social dominance to those with White skin—even those who haven’t earned it, even those of officially lower rank. I

learned that my sympathy and caring feelings did not extend to people of Color who weren't masochistically bound to me, or who weren't in such dire need that they trusted without question. I also harbored sadistic desires, deriving pleasure and self-worth from the continued domination of my neighbors. I felt purposeful so long as I viewed African Americans as helpless. Then, when I recognized people of Color as competent, intelligent leaders, I felt embarrassment, anger, and shame. I learned that the problem was not them. It was me.

Matias and Allen (2013) write:

Love is more than a superficial need to self-gratify; rather, it is a state of existence, a way of being in the world, that leads us back together. It is a feeling that is paid forward in the interconnectedness of our humanity and its capacity to produce conditions that are more just. Plainly stated, if whites actively leave their emotional investment in whiteness, then they not only leave behind a sadomasochistic notion of love, they also open the doors to experiencing humanity. (p. 302)

I learned from my short, yet enlightening time in Americorps, that I feared forming truly loving relationships with people of Color (Matias & Allen, 2013). I did not want to let go of my paternalistic attitude toward my coworkers and neighbors. Further, the false empathy (O'Brien, 2003) to which I clung led me to believe that caring for my neighbors was enough. I did not love in order to strengthen; I loved in order to impose. I refused to do the emotional work of deconstructing my sadomasochistic desires (Matias & Allen, 2013). Nor did I reflect on the social mechanisms of Whiteness that I upheld—namely, a

commitment to materialism, wealth, entitlement, and authority.

Unable to reconcile my self-image as a social justice worker with the reality of my growing racist feelings, I resigned and relocated to a predominantly White neighborhood. I renounced a core part of my identity—my desire to work for racial justice. And I gave up on my true self and held on, instead, to Whiteness. For three years, I struggled with self-hate, guilt, and shame. The real healing process did not begin until I started graduate school at the University of Colorado, Denver. There, I took my first critical Whiteness course, and I remember raising my hand on the first day, eagerly asking, "What can I do as a White person to fight for racial justice?" My professor, understandably exhausted by this question, gave me a simple, yet profound, answer: "Reflect."

I reflected, and I now confirm a few crucial things. First, I had learned through my education to think of White privilege and White supremacy as powerful processes that operated all around me. Yet, I didn't consider the ways that they operated *through* me. Systems are made up of people, and if we want to deconstruct White supremacy we must first abolish the mechanisms that uphold it. These mechanisms, called Whiteness, reside in many of us. Whiteness, among other things, is the belief that White emotionalities (Matias, 2014), such as discomfort and guilt, should trump the fear and agony felt by people of Color. It is the insistence that colorblindness will solve racial inequality. It is the mass violence effectuated by the police state. It is the colossal amount of wealth that has been produced off the backs of people of Color. Finally, it is the political and social investment in White supremacy that often goes overlooked until White authority is

challenged. After reflecting, as my teacher suggested, I realized that working for racial justice as a White person meant more than addressing the challenges faced by communities of Color. It means reflecting on how *my* beliefs and behaviors contribute to creating those problems in the first place. The Whiteness imbedded in each of us is one of our greatest obstacles to ending White supremacy. And in order to deconstruct it, we must first deconstruct ourselves.

Several years after resigning from Americorps, I now affirm the importance of continuously holding myself accountable for the ways that I uphold White supremacy. Doing this takes courage and a persistent commitment to personal integrity. I have also stopped being so scared of *seeming* racist, and instead work daily to own up to my racist beliefs. By allowing myself to undergo truthful, personal reflection, I can now begin to strip myself of the Whiteness embedded in my White identity. In essence, I hope to love myself and others so much that I “love my whiteness to death” (Matias & Allen, 2013).

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